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Online Civic Deliberation in E-Liberate

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1 Online Civic Deliberation

Online deliberation is the term for a network-based (usually Internet) computer application that supports the deliberative process in some way. At present, very few examples exist, although the number is slowly increasing. Online deliberation has advantages and disadvantages relative to face-to-face deliberation. Broad criteria of success for either approach include access to the process, efficacy of the process (such as individual involvement and the process as a whole), and integration with the social context (including legal requirements, etc.). Of course these criteria overlap to some degree and influence each other.

Online deliberation is a difficult service to provide and support optimally. Low literacy rates and the lack of access to appropriate networked computer facilities and services including support for non-English languages notwithstanding, there are three main reasons for this. The first reason is that very few applications are available for use. Of course, this challenge illustrates a 'chicken and egg' problem: if the applications do not exist, people will not use them. If people do not use them, programmers will not develop them. Systems and the culture of the communities who use them should coevolve. But deliberation applications are difficult to design and implement, and there is seemingly little money to be made with online deliberation. E-commerce, for example, has larger target populations, is easier to program, and is more lucrative.

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The second reason is that deliberation is difficult to do. It is time consuming, confusing in many cases due to complexity of content and process, such as knowing when to 'call the question'. Participants generally perceive the 'payoff' as far less than the effort expended within the process. As a point of comparison, consider voting in the United States as one form of civic participation that citizens can use. Half of all eligible voters are registered to vote and, of those, on the one day in the four-year span that separates voting opportunities, fewer than half of them make the effort to visit their polling place or drop their ballot in the mail.

The third reason may in fact to be related to the previous one: with few exceptions, governmental bodies from the smallest towns to the highest national and supranational levels seem unable (or, more accurately, unwilling) to support public deliberation in a genuine way, whether it is online or not.

Although the requirement of Internet access in online deliberation adds hurdles of cost, geography, and computer fluency, this barrier may be offset by the advantages that online deliberation provides, especially depending on the characteristics of the attendees. If, for example, the meeting attendees are drawn from Western Europe and the United States, the costs associated with computer communication will be less than transportation costs. As a matter of fact, online deliberation makes possible the prospect of more-or-less synchronous discussions among people around the world. Attendees on one side of the planet can make decisions while the other attendees sleep, solving the problem of dysfunctional meetings. The very fact that worldwide meetings become possible provides an enormously fertile ground for civil society opportunities.

Although face-to-face deliberation is generally 'low-tech', physically getting to meetings may involve costly, 'high-tech' travel. Once attendees are physically present at a face-to-face meeting, effective participation depends on the skills (including, for example, how to use a specific meeting protocol like *Robert's Rules of Order*), intentions, and knowledge of participants as well as the chair. Online environments, however, have the potential of alleviating, at least to some degree, some of the disadvantages that intrinsic to face-to-face settings. For example, online environments will only display actions that are allowable within the process at that time, thereby reducing the challenges faced by participants not thoroughly familiar with *Robert's Rules*. Online systems can also provide online 'help systems'. Within e-Liberate (discussed below) users can view descriptions of how and when specific actions are used. Also, as previously mentioned, a meeting transcript can be automatically created and votes can be tabulated as well.

2 E-Liberate: A Tool for Online Civic Deliberation

Motivated by a long-term desire to employ computing technology for social good, particularly among civil society groups who are striving to create more 'civic intelligence' in our society, I proposed that *Robert's Rules of Order* could be used as a basis for an online deliberation system (Schuler 1989, 1996, 2001). This was based on the widespread use of *Roberts's Rules* (at least in the United States) and its formalized definitions. Development of a network-based application aimed to provide nonprofit, community-based organizations with technology to facilitate effective deliberation when members cannot easily get together in face-to-face meetings. Face-to-face meetings are still very important, but appropriate use of online deliberation can hopefully help organizations with limited resources.

In 1999, at Evergreen State College, a team of students (John Adams, Amber Clark, Cory Dightman-Kovac, Neil Honomichael, and Matt Powell) developed the first prototype of an online version of *Robert's Rules of Order*. In 2003, Evergreen student Nathan Clinton, working with me, designed and implemented the system which is now being beta-tested with actual users. Greg Feigenson, Allen Williams, Fiorella De Cindio, and Antonio Marco have done follow-up work. Clinton and Schuler named the system e-Liberate, which rhymes with the verb *deliberate*. Ideally, the technology would increase the organization's effectiveness while requiring less time and money to conduct deliberative meetings.

Beginning in the late 1800s, Henry Robert developed *Robert's Rules of Order* over a forty year period by Henry Robert to designate an orderly process for fair decision making in face-to-face meetings. One of the most important design objectives was to guarantee every attendee's opportunity to make his or her ideas heard while ensuring that the minority could not prevent the majority from making decisions. These rules work at a variety of scales, from small groups of five to groups numbering in the hundreds. Thousands of organizations around the world now use *Robert's Rules of Order* every day and, in fact, governments and civil society organizations have legally mandated its use in meetings.

Moreover, *Robert's Rules of Order* is a type of protocol-based, cooperative work system. It is related to Malone et al.'s (1987) work on semi structured messages and Winograd and Flores' (1987) work which builds on the concept of the speech act (Austin 1962). Those examples all employ what is known as 'typed messages'. The message 'type' is, in effect, a descriptor of the message content, and because due to its discreteness, this 'type' is more easily handled by computer applications than natural language.

In designing e-Liberate, we took into consideration the importance of imposing a strict regimen over communication. Typically, control over

communication is appropriate when trying to handle contention over resources. In face-to-face deliberation, contentious moments include the time available for speaking and the existence of explicit objectives and/or formal constraints placed upon the venue, such as in a courtroom or parliament. Using a simple criterion of efficiency, participants will often weight the benefits of using one protocol or another should exceed the drawbacks. In voluntary assemblies such as those employed by civil society, this translates into individuals making a conscious or subconscious calculation of whether the effort of learning the rules (such as *Robert's Rules of Order*) and participating in the assembly is justified by the perceived benefits. As mentioned above, Robert worked on his rules for many years, and each adjustment was intended to remedy a particular problem that Robert observed. Robert—and, after Robert's death, his son—answered via letters all queries from people with questions or comments about the rules. To a computer programmer, this is analogous to meeting user needs by providing user support, fixing bugs, and issuing new releases. In either case, the change process is intended to make the system more amenable incrementally to the needs and preferences of its users.

E-Liberate is intended to be easy to use for anybody familiar with *Robert's Rules of Order*. The system employs a straightforward user interface (Figure 1) which is educational as well as facilitative. The interface shows only the legal actions that are available to the user at that specific time in the meeting. (For example, a user cannot second a motion when there is no motion on the table to second!) Also, at any time during a session, users can click an 'about' button to learn what each particular action will accomplish, thus gaining insight to information not available in face-to-face meetings. In addition, meeting quorums are checked, voting is conducted, and the minutes are automatically taken and archived.[1]

The system currently supports meetings that take place in real-time over an hour or so, as well as meetings that are less intense and more leisurely. Meetings could, in theory, span a year or so, making it necessary for meeting attendees to log in to e-Liberate once or twice a week to check for recent developments and perhaps vote or make a motion. E-Liberate currently supports the roles of *chairs*, *members*, and *observers*, and these meeting participants can be anywhere where browsers exist. Currently, the system automatically refreshes each user's browser every ten seconds to locate and retrieve any new inputs (such as motions) from other attendees, but we plan to use the AJAX paradigm to make this less visible (and annoying) to the user.

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[1] See http://clients.rocket51.com/e-Liberate/demo.php for a transcript of an entire sample meeting.

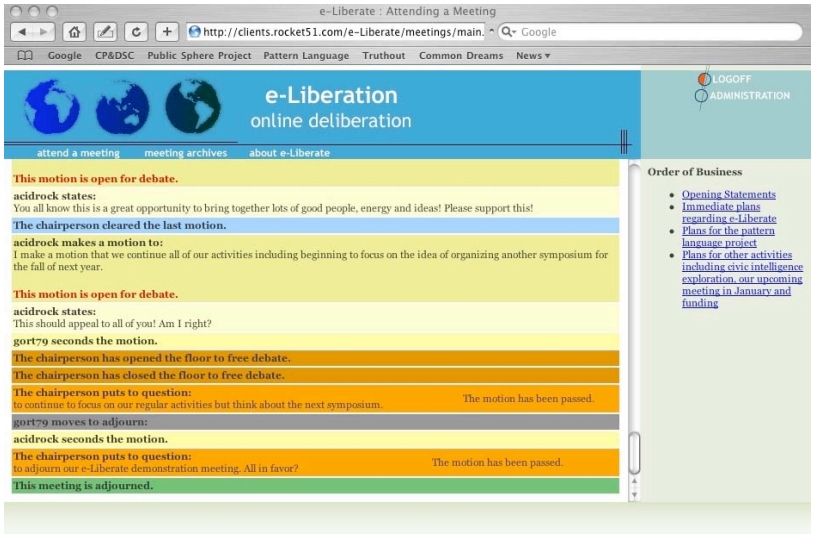

Fig. 1 E-Liberate Main User Interface

By providing cues to permissible actions and online help for all features, e-Liberate is intended to be educational. Meeting attendees should become more knowledgeable about *Robert's Rules* and the use of e-Liberate over time through normal use of the system. Having said that, however, it is still important to acknowledge that some knowledge of—and experience with—*Robert's Rules* is critical to successful participation in online meetings. Groups intending to use e-Liberate should work to ensure that all meeting attendees have a basic understanding of the various motions and the basic rules, and we have developed an online manual for that purpose. Additionally, the meeting chair should be prepared to assist attendees whenever possible. Finally, the developers have agreed to be available during meeting sessions to assist attendees.

Thus far, we have begun working with groups who are interested in using the system to support actual meetings. The hope is that nonprofit groups will use e-Liberate to save time and money on travel and use the resources they save on other activities that promote their core objectives. We are enthusiastic about the system but are well aware that the system as it stands is likely to have problems that need addressing. For this reason, we continue to host meetings with groups and gather feedback from attendees and intend to study a variety of online meetings in order to adjust the system and to develop heuristics for the use of the system. At some point, we plan to make

e-Liberate freely available for online meetings and to release the software under a free software license.

3 Preliminary Findings and Outstanding Issues

The first version of e-Liberate has been used in a handful of actual meetings (sometimes conducted as a way to see how well the system worked). The users have expressed positive reactions about the usefulness of the system as well as shortcomings in the system. Our admittedly minimal amount of experience with e-Liberate has nevertheless helped expose a broad range of issues which need to be investigated over time. Unfortunately, there is only room for brief discussion of these shortcomings and issues.

One drawback of e-Liberate concerns the fact that computers cannot—or are very unlikely to—perform appropriately based on the content of messages. The typed messages are part of grammars which specify allowable 'moves' in a conversation. For example, a move of message type 'seconding a motion' is only legal directly after another participant in a deliberative setting makes a 'making a motion' move. Computers, with their penchant for following rules, can be invaluable for imposing the discipline of an immutable protocol. This is not always agreeable to users. In an infamous incident in computer lore, disgruntled users of the Coordinator, a groupware application based on the ideas developed by Winograd and Flores (1987), proclaimed that the program was 'Nazi-ware' and angrily cast the disks out of their offices. It is possible, of course, that if the users had derived enough benefit from the Coordinator version that they did use, they would have helped transform it into a less dictatorial program.

Another drawback concerned the developers. The objective of e-Liberate was to move beyond chat, premature endings, and unresolved digressions. We wanted to support groups already working for social change and mimic their existing processes as closely as possible. This approach attempted to minimize disruption by integrating the online system as unobtrusively as possible into their work lives. However, this strategy has met with unexpected resistance: software people seem to be constitutionally opposed to implementing existing systems. The few developers I asked stated that *Robert's Rules w*as a bad choice (although they in general were not familiar with it) and that they thought that users should be able to make motions *in parallel.* This capability could easily lead to a variety of problems, including the possibility of several competing motions being discussed and amended simultaneously.

The biggest problem is that the developers' totally disregarded the user base and the important lessons about deliberation that came to be embodied in the rules. Again, as mentioned above, additional or modified functional-

ity to the *Robert's Rules* implementation could be changed but only as a response to user input.

One set of issues is related to the role of chair, which *Robert's Rules of Order* explicitly specifies for every meeting. The role includes enforcing 'rules relating to debate and those relating to order and decorum', determining when a rule is out of order and to 'expedite business in every way compatible with the rights of members' (Robert 1990:). In all, the main reason that a chair is needed at all is due to the fact the rules alone will not suffice. A variety of situations require the chair's input, notably when human judgment is required. Another reason that Robert called upon the services of a chair in his deliberative universe is that meeting attendees may attempt to 'game the game' by invoking rules, which although strictly legal, violate the spirit of the meeting.

The special status of the chair dictates that the human assuming that role needs to be particularly vigilant, especially in light of conniving participants. But what if they do not tend to be connivers? What if they are extremely fair minded and conciliatory? Should not the chair be allowed to put his tasks into an 'auto pilot mode' which could approve nonproblematic requests? If this mode existed, the chair could, say, allow one 'point of order' per attendee an hour or other unit of time, or even as some fraction of the total number of points of order made by all participants. Of course this could also lead to 'gaming'. At that point, of course, the chair would need to be brought back from retirement to reassert his or her 'human touch'. We initiated a form of 'auto pilot' in e-Liberate after we ascertained that the chair could actually be an impediment to progress and seemed less necessary in the online environment—at least the particular configuration of our meeting. When an attendee requests the floor, he or she is automatically 'recognized' by the automated proxy of the chair.

Another set of issues, when meeting attendees are unseen and distributed, arises in the process of adapting face-to-face processes in online environments. For example, how do we know when a quorum is present? This is part of the larger issue of how do we know who is online? Establishing the identity of a person who is interacting, sight unseen, via the Internet is important and certainly not trivial, such as in the case of online voting. We also would like to know whether, for example, members are offline by choice or whether they want to participate but are unable to connect? And, if not connected and/or not paying attention to the meeting at any given time, does that mean they are not in attendance and, consequently, a quorum may no longer exist?

All of these issues are interrelated and influence each other in obvious and subtle ways. For example, since attendees are no longer at a single

shared location, where they would be (presumably) attending solely to the business of the assembly, the question of meeting duration comes up. Should meetings be relatively intense affairs where all attendees interact, and business is conducted in one or two hours? Or should/could the meeting be more leisurely, perhaps stretching over one or two weeks? The values assigned to a particular meeting (which act as constraints enforced by the deliberation tool) probably need to be established in relation to each other and to the characteristics of the individual meeting. These characteristics could include the number of attendees, distribution of attendees across time zones, deadlines for decisions, and so on.

The distribution of attendees across time zones highlights and helps bring forward a variety of 'problems' that humankind's earth-based orientation and social institutions (like the work day or work week, and family obligations) place in the way of Internet-enabled 'always-on' opportunities. These problems add considerable complexity to an already complex undertaking. Addressing these issues will require social as well as technological approaches. It may be advisable to establish a certain span of time as a 'recess' which prevents user input or only permits a maximum length and/or number of comments that an attendee can submit on any given motion. E-Liberate's 'meeting configuration' page is currently fairly sparse, but this can change over time to better reflect the needs of its users.

How well will e-Liberate perform when used by larger groups? The only way to learn is to host meetings with larger numbers of people—50, 100, 1000—observe the results and interview the participants. Finding groups this large with a strong enough interest seems unlikely in the short term, but if trials work out well with smaller groups, increasing the size of the groups willing to invest the time should also increase.

A final set of issues is related to the legal and other aspects of the social environment in which the system operates. In many cases, for example, meetings of nonprofit groups are required to be public. Does an online environment that allows for 'observers' (as e-Liberate does) meet this requirement? The law sometimes requires a certain number of meetings every year. A system like e-Liberate could help organizations do this more easily, by automatically sending out meeting notices, for example. In addition, developers must face the issue of cultural biases. We encourage collaborative projects that address these issues.

4 Next Steps

E-Liberate, after some modification, is likely to be useful for groups who want to conduct online meetings using *Robert's Rules of Order*, and we will continue to pursue this end by working with actual groups. In addition to

improving the usability of e-Liberate with basic adjustments, we will pursue two additional lines of development: (1) working with outside groups to continue development, and (2) working on ways to augment the system—while leaving the fundamental model intact. In other words, although the system would be extended in various ways meeting attendees would still be able to employ *Robert's Rules of Order* to arrive at decisions in an equitable, collective manner.

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